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Subject: From the Western News Online

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Subject: From the Western News Online

EPA setting up shop in Libby

By Brent Shrum, Western News Reporter

The federal Environmental Protection Agency is setting up shop in downtown Libby with asbestos testing of area homes and businesses scheduled to begin this week.

The agency plans to rent a commercial building at 501 Mineral Ave. to use as a base of operations in Libby, according to John Wardell, director of the EPA's Helena field office. The office should be operational by Friday, Dec. 10. It will give local residents a place to go to contact the EPA on issues relating to asbestos contamination from the former W.R. Grace vermiculite mine. A telephone number will be published as soon as a line is connected, Wardell said.

The EPA plans to conduct further testing at Raintree Nursery off Montana Highway 37 this week, Wardell said. The nursery was the site of a processing plant when the mine on Vermiculite Mountain was in operation.

Some piles of vermiculite were left behind at the site, but after an initial inspection EPA team coordinator Paul Peronard said there didn't appear to be a public health risk.

The vermiculite produced by the mine contained varying concentrations of asbestos, which occurred naturally along with the vermiculite. The asbestos was considered an impurity, and most of the toxic material was removed at the mine site and ended up in a tailings pile.

After testing is completed at Raintree, the EPA team will start looking at area homes where vermiculite from the mine may have been used as insulation or for drainage in gardens, Wardell said.

"I think there's approximately 25 homes that we'll be sampling based on people who have volunteered to let us come on their property," he said.

Testing of homes will probably begin late this week or early next week, Wardell said. Twenty-five to 30 residents have offered their homes for the checks.

The team will sample for fibers in dust and air inside the homes as well as soil from the yard or garden. The scientists hope to couple the sample results with information provided by residents.

That should give a better picture of how people have been exposed to asbestos and whether there is a current health risk from exposure to asbestos fibers.

Peronard said last week that 200 to 300 homes will probably be tested by the time the EPA completes its work.

Where the EPA's investigation goes will depend largely on the results of the testing that is done this week, Wardell said. If the agency doesn't maintain a local presence throughout the winter and spring, it will be returning in the

summer for another round.

"Some of the sampling we feel needs to take place during the summer when conditions are drier," Wardell said. The EPA turned its attention to Libby following widespread media coverage of respiratory problems among former miners and their families, as well as others who were exposed to asbestos, including people who as children played in the material.

A hearing last Wednesday gathered public input on the requested release of a \$67,000 reclamation bond for the former mine site, now owned by Kootenai Development Company.

Reclamation of the site began after the mine shut down in 1990. An initial bond of \$472,000 was issued, but the bulk of the money was released in 1994 after most of the reclamation work was completed.

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality is accepting comments on the reclamation bond issue until Jan 1.